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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2536
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9462
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1355
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8791
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7642
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 006582

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/06/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER BLINKS ON ULTIMATUM

Classified By: DCM Geeta Pasi, reason para 1.4 d.

11. (C) On November 3, Awami League president Sheikh Hasina unexpectedly extended until November 11 her deadline for government action on her 11 demands pertaining to the upcoming elections.

12. (C) According to Awami League contacts, she made the decision because of assurances from Chief Adviser Ahmed that he was working on her principal demand to replace the controversial Chief Election Commissioner and his senior colleagues, and in reaction to Ambassador's public appeals for more time and to forego new violence. Negative popular reaction to the opposition-led violence, and fears that the violence could spiral out of everyone's control, may have been other factors.

13. (C) Our contacts are mixed on Hasina's genuine assessment of her electoral prospects and the extent of her determination to pursue confrontation. Some say she sees the electoral arithmetic as stacked against her because of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's alliance with Jamaat Islami and Ershad's Jatiya party, and that she is reconciled to another terms as leader of the opposition. (Note: General Ershad's announcement on November 6 that he is not rpt not joining forces with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party could prompt a radical reassessment of such views.)

14. (C) Contacts across the political spectrum agree there is a coterie of Independence-era hard-liners in the Awami League who oppose participation in the elections under any circumstances because they anticipate defeat for the party and themselves personally in their own constituencies.

15. (C) Comment: Hasina's decision to give the government more time is welcomed, but it is unclear if this is just a respite or signals a real change in approach. The outcome may hinge on the fate of Chief Election Commissioner Aziz, who insists publicly and privately (including to Ambassador late today--septel) that the constitution and god prevent him from resigning. Whether Hasina thinks she could win a fair election, and would thus be amenable to compromise to get to the polling, remains the big unanswered question. While we expect our Awami League contacts to stress with us the impact of the Ambassador's remarks, there is no question the Awami League remains extremely solicitous of USG good will.
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